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Omani Sultan a Quiet U.S. Friend

The United States has a staunch Mideast friend who is unknown to most Americans. Sultan Qabus bin Said, the 42-year-old absolute ruler of Oman, the Kansas-sized nation at the eastern end of the Arabian peninsula, doesn't proclaim his pro-American sentiments from the palace rooftop in Muscat. But he is on the U.S. side when it counts.

Oman was one of two Arab states that gave public support to the 1979 Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt. And in 1980, the sultan agreed to let the United States stash military equipment at strategically located bases, which can be used for intelligence gathering, communications and as staging areas for U.S. rapid-deployment forces in the event of a Persian Gulf crisis.

The sultan's friendship with America has cost him more than Arab resentment. We have learned that more than a year ago the Saudis, evidently jealous of their perceived status as No. 1 U.S. ally in the Arab world, offered Oman $2 billion if the sultan would put distance between his country and the United States. The offer was rejected.

Qabus is the model of a modern, enlightened Arab leader. Educated at Sandhurst, the British military college, he brought back western ideas that were too progressive for his isolationist father, Sultan Taimur bin Said. The old man, a fundamentalist fanatic, kept his son under virtual house arrest for more than a year. Finally, with the help of the British and particularly of an old Sandhurst buddy, Timothy Landon, Qabus overthrew his father and began laboriously bringing his 900,000 countrymen into the 20th century.

When Qabus seized the throne in 1970, Oman had five miles of paved road, three schools and no health facilities worth mentioning. There are now more than 2,000 miles of paved highway, another 8,000 miles of graded roads and more than 460 schools attended by both sexes. The country has six major hospitals and 230 other health centers.

The young sultan also extinguished a guerrilla movement in the southern province of Dhofar that was supported by the Soviets and their satellite, South Yemen. The British played a crucial role in this as well, with help from the shah of Iran.

The Saudis were not pleased with Oman's progressive and independent course. They consider themselves a sort of Big Brother to the smaller Persian Gulf states, maintaining their dominance by the judicious expenditure of petrodollars. Oman, whose oil reserves are piddling compared to its more fortunately situated neighbors, seemed a likely prospect for such dollar diplomacy.

According to a top-secret CIA report, the Saudis kept promising Oman development funds, but tied their largess to the removal of Iranian troops from Dhofar province. The shah's closeness to the Americans had always worried the Saudis, and they apparently didn't want their little Omani neighbor following the shah into the CIA's pocket.

Qabus was eager for the Saudi development money, and the deal was "all but signed," the CIA noted. But the Saudis were "playing a game with Qabus—withholding assistance until the Omani sultan [saw] the light and [sent] the Iranian troops" home. The arrangement fell through, leaving the sultan professing "to be mystified by Riyadh's handling of the matter."

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